Ellen Taaffe Zwilich Interviewed by Ara Guzelimian at Carnegie Hall on April 16, 1999.

Transcript of recorded interview: Ellen Taaffe Zwilich Interviewed by Ara Guzelimian at Carnegie Hall on April 16, 1999.

From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich:

I think we should end with the last four years, don't you?
First we need the . . . are you actually rolling? And this is OK, the mic is not rustling or anything for me?

Ara Guzelimian:

And you've heard enough from both of us?

ETZ:

He has a real voice. I have one of these froggy things.
My name is Ellen Taafe Zwilich and I'm here today with Ara Guzelimian who is the artistic advisor at Carnegie Hall. Hello Ara.

AG:

Hello Ellen.

ETZ:

It is April the 16th 1999, and I'm close to the very end of a four-year tenure as the first Carnegie Hall Composers Chair. We're here today in the archives of Carnegie Hall in another of the series of composer archival video tapes. So…

AG:

Ellen, let's begin with a recent honor and then we'll look back and come back to the present. Musical America in its current edition, 1999, has chosen you to be the composer of the year, which is a wonderful recognition of one's place in the musical life of this

country . . . in a very broad context and its one of a series of happy congratulatory phone calls that have come to you, and we'll go backwards to some of them but talk about how you found out about this one and what this particular honor means, especially in the company of some of the other musicians who were honored as well: Andre Previn, who's the musician of the year and some of the others . . .

ETZ:

Manny Ax and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Well it was a great honor for me of course and I was jumping for joy when they called me and told me I was composer of the year for 1999. And they did a very nice sort of project where they showed a lot of the history of me as a composer; it's a very nice thing to be apart of. I think probably being a composer, and being able to compose is the greatest honor of all, and that to me, of course it's also wonderful to me to be recognized by your peers, and I think that is something very special.

AG:

Talk a little about the fact that composing itself is a solitary occupation. The act of composing, obviously once the work is written then a series of collaborations begin, and how recognition and acceptance, especially, by one's peers can help feed the creative process for a composer to know that one's peers especially one's fellow musicians and the company you're in this kind of award can give one an additional degree of confidence, or the fact that one's work is recognized when it begins in a solitary room with you and a blank page of music paper.

ETZ:

Well that's to me, probably the most interesting thing about what I do to people who don't do it, is the extremes, for instance, I spent most of my time, as you said alone in a room with a blank piece of paper, and yet even while I'm sitting there I'm thinking of the performers, I'm imagining them playing my music. And I do everything in that moment to, including having score paper of the whole ensemble that I'm using to sketch so I have a sense of the presence of the ensemble I'm writing for, but it's a very, very solitary kind of, inward looking existence. And then it's like boom . . . you're shot out of a cannon and suddenly 106 new orchestra people and an audience of 2500 each night, and it's just an incredibly varied experience. I think both things are necessary. In fact I think of it, almost like the northern European thing, where you take sauna and you get very hot and then you jump into a cold ice water, and then back, and I think it keeps your arteries open somehow

or other. For me the feedback from the performers and as I've looked over the materials that are just here at Carnegie Hall I see how much is an ongoing relationship and this means the world to me. I see for instance the relationships that I have that go back 25 years with performers. You just have to have a reaction to that and a feeling of fulfillment and of learning from one another and growing together. It's a very special kind of thing.

AG:

So the extreme of a composer's life goes from the very private to sometimes very public...

ETZ:

The extraordinarily public, yes.

AG:

…and that moment of stepping out on stage here at Carnegie Hall for you very often in recent years. When did…

ETZ:

That's a moment of great joy, the whole thing, not just the stepping on the stage
When you sit in an auditorium with 2500 other people and hear your music, or I should say, I'm talking--I'm the only composer who knows how I feel--when I sit there and you're hearing this piece with all these other people for the first time, and the performers are reacting to the audience for the first time so you are really hearing the first performance of the piece as opposed to a rehearsal. That is just an experience that is just hard to imagine and it's a . . . I kind of feel like a huge gong that's been hit and it takes me a few days to oscillate down to like normal. It's a wonderful feeling.

AG:

We've just gone through this young composer's process. One of the things that struck me at the workshop just a few days ago, we had the rare chance to hear pieces develop over rehearsal, very often by expert performers, and then finally the blossoming of the pieces at a performance at the Weill recital hall, I was very much struck by, no matter how good the rehearsals were that the performance yet had still another degree of edge and communicative power, maybe it's the tension in both its positive and negative manifestation, that the piece finally had a kind of sheen in the performance that even in the best rehearsal they never quite had, which isn't to suggest that some of the rehearsals may have gone more mechanically perfectly. Do you find that true in your experience?

ETZ:

Definitely. And I have a very simple explanation for it: When you're in rehearsal you are working and when the composer is in the room the performer is looking over his or her shoulder. As a matter of fact, I, when Lorin Maazel recorded my bassoon concerto with Nancy Goeres and I was invited to the recording session, I said no. I don't want to be in that room. It's between you and the audience. It's your piece now, it's not my piece. I said the same thing to the Chamber Music Society when they recorded my Clarinet Quintet. I went to the rehearsal. I know all the people very well, I knew they'd do it great, but it has to be their's and when you're looking over your shoulder you're not projecting in the same way as if you're out there and it all rises and falls on your shoulders. So I think it's a very human kind of situation. My feeling about writing music is I write it and then I turn it over to what I hope are very good hands. There's usually a collaboration process in preparing a performance but once you get to that point where you are ready for the public then you should - in my opinion you should never play if you're not - and we did everything we could in this workshop to make sure that it was ready to go. Once you're there then it's the communication that is very direct between the performer and the audience and the composer is kind of incidental to the process in a wonderful kind of way.

AG:

I think that's very smart what you do, particularly in a recording session, I've never really thought about that. Good for you. You let the piece go, obviously in the examples you gave with Chamber Music Society and the Pittsburgh Symphony you worked closely with them individually…

ETZ:

Oh yes, yes.

AG:

…and in rehearsals and through the first performance but that by your absence you give both a vote of confidence and a certain measure of freedom; I think that's so smart. We are talking in April of 1999 in a month that sees a milestone birthday for you and I would say safely that you're one of the most honored composers in America, not only with the Musical America Composer of the year, but a Pulitzer Prize to your credit, and this tenure as the founding Composer's Chair of Carnegie Hall. I would think there was a time, if we can turn the clock back, when all of these honors were probably the, if not the furthest

thing from your mind at least your wildest fantasies, some of these honors. Talk about your early years, give us a little sense of your family background particularly in terms of your involvement in music and talk about first how you became involved in music and then we'll take it the next step, when composition became a part of your thought process.

ETZ:

OK. First of all I have to say that my wildest dreams were to have . . . I used to just dream that the New York Philharmonic would play a piece of mine I never dreamed about winning prizes and things like that. I didn't know to dream about it, it's very nice, but for me the really fulfilling thing are the wonderful performances by artists, artist performers. I was born almost sixty years ago in Miami, FL. I was adopted by Ruth and Edward Taa fe when I was about six months old. My mother, whose name was Alice Virginia Hope; I found that out when I was fifty years old. And for any musicologists who would be looking through my works they might find my Flute Concerto is dedicated to my beloved mother Alice Virginia Hope and my Clarinet Quintet is written in memory of my mother Ruth Taaffe. My father, Edward Taaffe, was an airline pilot; he flew clippers from Miami to Rio in the 30s, in fact they lived in Rio for a couple of years in the 30s. And I lived mostly in Miami, although we moved to Jacksonville when I was quite young, because I know that I was in Jacksonville when Pearl Harbor happened and I was very young, I was a toddler, I was a year and a half, but I knew from what happened to the adults that something terrible had happened, and I knew what a pearl was, and I was playing with my toys in front of the radio when this happened. I grew up mainly in Florida. The family that I grew up in was not musical, but we did have a piano in the house. And before I could walk, I crawled up under the piano bench and found out what happened when you pressed down a key, and there's a part of me that's never left that piano bench, I just, it's like a world that I can't believe exists, this world of music. And I used to sit at the piano and make things up, and I was the kind of little kid who had to be told to go out and play with your friends, stop doing this. I began to play other instruments as I got into about sixth grade something like that. I began to play the trumpet and the violin, and by the time I was in high school I was pretty good at both, I was concert master of the orchestra, and first trumpet in the band and we had a fabulous music program in Coral Gables, Coral Gables High School, outside of Miami. Our symphonic band was almost on a professional level. The orchestra, you know, could struggle and scraggle its way through the Mozart 40th Symphony and it was a very, very strong program, and I do have a picture that goes back, it has to be, forty-four years. This is three of my, two of my colleagues and this is me with the fiddle. Interestingly this was a coed school and these three were girls: she was first trombone, and she was first clarinet,

and I was concert master, or as they said in those days “concert mistress,” but we had behind the screen auditions in my high school which is kind of hard to believe.

AG:

Way ahead of its time.

ETZ:

Yeah, Yeah. And so you had normal, as you find today in orchestras today, girls got to the top over here and boys got to the top over there and nobody said boo about it, which is quite remarkable to me. Anyway. I had my first really inspiring teacher was a trumpet teacher; I had pretty awful experiences with music teachers in general until I got to him. I started studying piano when I was five, and I liked the music I made up better than the music I was given and said so, and I wouldn’t practice certain pieces that I was given for recitals, I thought they were stupid. I must have been impossible. I had had a violin teacher who, we just couldn’t get along at all. I had the wrong questions, and I didn’t really get to a good teacher until I was about 12 or 13. Meanwhile I had started kinda of writing things down, in a very childish scrawl, and I was still doing a lot of improvising on the piano and on whatever I had at hand.

AG:

It strikes me as very unusual that you had the creative instinct, not only the recreative instinct of performing, but the desire to make it up, it sounds like, from the beginning. When you started writing it down, was anyone directing you, teaching . . .

ETZ:

No. Oh no

AG:

So that desire goes back very early.

ETZ:

It’s very, very early and unprompted. Probably related to my actual genetic family. But the…

AG:

Do you know much about your birth family?

ETZ:

I know about my mother's side and it's funny, there are musicians everywhere. Someone sang in the San Francisco opera, there were violinists and… also my grandfather rode with Pancho Villa, somebody else opened one of the first casinos in Nevada, it was a kind of people that were just wild enough to want to write music. And I'm kinda glad that I was left alone as a youngster because I think that if I had found really good teachers, I would have been a pianist or a violinist solely, and I've had really good discipline that resulted in something. You know when you study an instrument and you work very hard and you hear the result it's very inspiring, but I was left kinda alone which I think was basically good. Also I was interested in all kinds of music. It was not just the European piano teacher beating you over your knuckles; but I was playing in little bands, doing all kinds of things.

AG:

So you listened to pop music at the time.

ETZ:

Oh sure! And as a matter of fact, when I was in high school one of the things that happened to me that might have spoiled me in a certain regard is that if you played in the symphonic band you had to play in the marching band. Our football team played, of course, in the Orange Bowl, which is a pretty big place, and we had a band director who couldn't read a score and tell what it was going to sound like. And so two or three times it happened that we got out on a field on a Monday and the game was on Saturday and you couldn't hear the tune because it was in the celesta which was back in the… I mean that's an exaggeration, but he would scream "TaaaaFee" go write us an arrangement. He would send kids who had demerits running behind me, and I would go in quickly and I'd do this.

AG:

Would they copy the parts?

ETZ:

Yeah, they copied the parts, I wrote as fast as I could, and they copied the parts, and Saturday night it was in the Orange Bowl. I think one of the things was "Bali Hai" and one was "This Old House," things like that, poppish tunes at the time. Another one of my occupations during high school was taking trumpet solos off the Glenn Miller recordings for a little dance band, which I didn't play in at that time cause I wanted to dance, and

none of the trumpet players could improvise, so I would take the stuff off of recordings, and as I mention this inspiring teacher the trumpet teacher that I had, his name was Bower Murphy, and one of my pieces is dedicated to him, because he was a Pied Piper kind of teacher. And if he thought you were just sorta hanging in there he gave you easy stuff, if he thought you had talent, he pushed you incredibly. The second week I studied with him I was in a brass ensemble at the university, and I was a thirteen year old girl, and the next time I went to the Miami Symphony, the whole brass section knew about me. He was a really wonderful kind of teacher. He had me bring in my fiddle and play; He had me bring in some of my writing. He himself wrote little two-part inventions that he played for his students and etudes for certain problems we had, and so I was just kinda doing this and that and everything you could think of. I began to sort of write kind of quasi serious things about my senior year in high school, but still at that point the only career I thought of was as a music teacher. And I went to Florida State as a music education major. I changed, I think, towards the end of my first year to theory and composition, against a lot of advice, because I had really discovered that I wanted to, I didn't want to be a music teacher, I want to make music. I also discovered in college, at, I went to Florida State University in Tallahassee. Tallahassee was a very interesting place for a couple of reasons: one, this was just after WWII, which meant a variety of things for a college student in those days, one of course, was that the best people in Europe had left and they were here. Ernst Von Dohnanyi was at Florida State, and it isn't just that he was a name on a catalogue. I had, if not daily, at least weekly contact with him. I played in, he had a conducting class, and a little orchestra assembled for them to conduct the second half of the class. I did that for three and a half years, until he passed away. I played chamber music with him, and he drove me home on Tuesdays, he knew who I was dating, it was a very wonderful thing, and I got to talk to him about music, and get a totally different perspective. At that time he was really so much a successor to Brahms, that people didn't come there to study composition with him, they studied piano with him. When he taught composition, he taught fugue. So those of us who were composers were doing something that was, we were more interested in his contemporary Bartok, and but I must say that was an extraordinary thing, and a wonderful faculty, they still have an excellent, excellent faculty. And meanwhile in the town of Tallahassee, it was kind of a jazz hot bed. This was the era of segregation; I was there during the sit-ins, the Woolworth sit-ins that began the civil rights movement. But when I first went to Tallahassee, this was in 1956, Nat Adderly and Cannonball Adderly were local boys and there was kind of a hotbed of people who were interested in the jazz of the time, and the music building was closed every Sunday, the rehearsal room was locked--the big instrumental rehearsal room. Magically a whole bunch of people had keys,

and it was an all day long jam session, and it was a wonderful kind of jazz education with the older people kinda bringing along the younger ones saying “hey, you’ve gotta listen to this.” It was quite extraordinary.

AG:

And did you play in this.

ETZ:

Oh yeah, I played. Trumpet. And…

AG:

So you kept both violin and trumpet going through college.

ETZ:

Oh yeah, all the way through college. And I played like when I was in high school I played the Haydn Concerto on trumpet. I was a pretty good trumpet player, and I improvised so I was useful in the lab band, and we had people writing arrangements, and doing interesting big band stuff. But, this small combo jazz just really went on all day Sunday and that was very interesting to me, and although there were people on the faculty that frowned on that, and then there were people in the jazz community who were saying “What are you doing with Beethoven?” I had this peculiar American education that people of my generation managed to get and that was going from playing a Bartok string quartet to playing a Brahms piano trio to playing a trumpet in the lab band. And it all, none of this seemed peculiar, this just seemed like the normal thing. I still think it’s a perfectly normal thing, but it’s an American perspective. Uniquely American, I think.

AG:

To leap forward for a second, how does that combination of things in your background manifest itself? Can you see it in your music, does it liberate you in any way. Does it prevent you from saying “No, I can’t do that because . . .” Having a broader musical vocabulary, does it allow you to do things you couldn’t do with a narrower background?

ETZ:

Oh, I think definitely and it’s odd, I don’t think it’s so much a matter of techniques, but it’s a matter of feeling that you have the right, you might say, as a young composer, to choose your ancestors, and to go towards those things that you most love. And I think

that's why when I've done the Making Music series it occurred to me to ask the composers to bring other music that means something to you. It's such a different experience from past experiences and even present experiences in some places in the world. It's true that we are to a large extent what we have loved as musicians and we bring this whole thing to the mix. We're all very different.

AG:

I love this notion, that as a composer you choose your ancestors. That is really wonderful. I'm curious, I want to know some of your specific musical ancestors.

I'm always curious what pieces you early on fell in love with almost as a kid or as a teenager? What classical pieces do you remember particularly connecting to or having a fixation on, that somehow drew you or that you responded to with a particular strength?

ETZ:

Yes, as a matter of fact when I did my own Making Music concert, the music I brought is music that I love: it was Beethoven, and George Gershwin, and Thelonious Monk. I remember hearing the Beethoven Fifth Symphony and thinking it was just the most wonderful thing in the world, and I remember, this sounds really silly, I was very little, and when I found out he was dead, I was just terribly sad, it's like this was so full of life to me, and that music continues to have an unbelievable resonance with me. I think, I grew up in a Catholic Church and in the days when they had chant, now Father Brennan may have had a pretty lousy voice, but the Gregorian Chant is also an extraordinarily beautiful thing and it's something that's sort of been with me my whole life also. So something about that, and perhaps even the notion of music having some very special purpose, not a decorative thing, it's something very, very special.

AG:

something that has an almost sacred, or ceremonial, or ritual place.

[break in tape]

AG:

What you've described so far I'm also struck by the fact that you said in your last year of high school you began to write your first sort of serious pieces, and by a little more than a year later, by the end of your first year in college, that you had focused on theory and composition even though you were, obviously, very able as a violinist and trumpeter, you didn't focus on performance.

ETZ:

Well, that's not quite true. 'Cause I was kinda doing everything musical that wasn't nailed down basically. I played, I once was told by a faculty member that I knew rather well that the conductor of the orchestra was asked about somebody to play a particular thing, well ask Taafe she'd rather play than eat. Which was really probably true. I played, I just made music all day long. In fact one of the things that convinced me to be a professional musician was when a professor said "well, enjoy it while you can because when you get out of school you won't be able to be involved with performance, that much." I thought, "oh God, this is not what I want. I want to be involved in performance."

AG:

But you still chose, with that level of activity, you still chose theory and composition. On some level some part of you was focusing on composition.

ETZ:

I was most interested in that, but I guess the word focus because I've often likened my life as a composer to taking a lens and just gradually bringing it into "there you've got it."

AG:

So performing and composing, it sounds like just naturally have co-existed from the first instant. At some point you focused your performance activities on violin rather than trumpet. Was that in college, or was that after college.

ETZ:

I began to, by the time I was in a senior in college, even though I wasn't a trumpet major, I'd played everything I wanted to play of the repertoire. I didn't have any particular interest in playing in orchestra. A couple of my boyfriends went on to, one of them went out to Las Vegas and became Frank Sinatra's favorite trumpet player; another went to the Minnesota orchestra, where he still is. I didn't have any interest in professional trumpet playing. I had gotten kind of bored with the literature. In fact I wrote a sonatina partly for that reason. And meanwhile I got more and more interested in the violin literature, particularly the chamber music literature. And that's when I already had a master's degree in composition when I decided to come to New York. And one of the reasons I came to New York was to audition for Galamian. But I would say that when I look back I see that everything I did sort of leads clearly to something, but I was kinda muddling around, and of course when you

realize that around 1960 there was no such thing, even less than today, as “profession: composer” . . . . what is a composer going to do. Well the ones I know, taught.

AG:

What did you, as you emerged from college, what did you imagine your future to be?

ETZ:

I had no idea. I kind of I tried college teaching, and I liked it OK, but it made me realize more that I wanted to write and I wanted to be involved to real hands-on music making, not sitting in a classroom somewhere talking about it. I wanted to be doing it one way or the other. So fortunately when I came to New York, I passed my audition with Galamian, I knew I think two people in New York at that time, I had no support system of any sort. But I had a wonderful time.

AG:

What year was this.

ETZ:

1963 or 4 I forget. And I kinda soon began to work as a violinist. And that was something that…I just feel terribly grateful to have had the experience I had. I also have done a lot of teaching. I think the second year I was here my violin teacher from Florida, Richard Burgin, was up here for the Mitropoulis competition, and he said “What are you doing?” I was playing in the orchestra. And I said I was doing, this, this, this, and this. And he laughed, and he said everybody in New York has three jobs. That was like a typical young free-lance musician: I was doing a little teaching, I was doing a lot of playing, and one point I wrote liner notes, I just really did whatever I had to do. But the second year I was here I began to play full time in the American Symphony under Leopold Stokowski. A picture of whom we have over here from that time. That’s really . . . (laughs) . . I think he knew the camera was on him at this moment.

AG:

I think he always assumed the camera was on him.

ETZ:

The camera was always rolling for Stokowski. Here’s another picture. It’s interesting. His hands were so much a part of his conducting. His phrasing with the hands. And that

was seven years. Just yesterday I went through the archive, and I didn't get all the way through, there was just so much stuff. But I remember it for so many different reasons. Among them, Stokowski for whatever his musical failings and pretenses, and what not, he had a contemporary piece on just about every program we did, unless we were doing some huge evening-long thing, there was a new piece. And as I looked back through the programs that I played then it reminds me we were playing Lutoslawski and Takemitsu in the 60s, the Ives fourth premiere took place the year before I joined the orchestra, but I did play it with Stokowksi like two or three years later. And…I won't repeat what I said to you. [laughter] Among other things in the American Symphony experience we had not only Stokowski, who was, we were a young orchestra a very young orchestra…

AG:

And he was a very old conductor.

EZ: He was in his upper eighties, and he had not slowed down in certain ways but it was a very young orchestra, and a lot of people kinda went through there, for instance, Gerry Schwartz was there for a while as a trumpet player, and now, of course, he is a wonderful conductor, Paul Dunkel was there as a flutist, now, also he's a conductor, and Ed Birdwell went through there, the list goes on and on, and many of the principal players in orchestras around the country at least went through there for a while. It was a very interesting group of people. And another wonderful thing about it, Stokowski was always sort of giving us sort of advice, and some of it was very good, as in: a musician is never staying the same. If you're not trying to get better, you're getting worse. You could write that on a wall and follow that. He had a lot of very good ideas, when he knew a piece, he was wonderful at it. And he had a way of phrasing with his hands that made it so easy to play and to get sound out of an orchestra. But one of the things I most remember about the orchestra was some of the guest conductors we had, and we have a couple of pictures here. Eugen Jochum who was a, with whom I recall a concert with the Bruckner Fifth symphony, and Bruckner was not my cup of tea but he made me love it, and that was to me a mark of a great conductor. We don't have a picture of Karl Bohm, but I think we have a program back here. He did an absolutely memorable concert of Schubert…

AG:

The great C Major?

EZ: Yeah, and Hindemith Symphonic Metamorphosis. And a kind of interesting thing for me as a young performer and a composer was going through this experience of dealing with people on that kind of level. Bohm, for instance, had very poor stick technique, and

unlike Jochum who was like a grandfatherly like “no, that’s not right, do it this way,” a patient teacher, Bohm’s idea of rehearsing was announcing that he was going to go back to Vienna where they really knew how to play, and just sort of screaming, and kind of ineffectually, but Bohm got so much out of an orchestra and played also at the Met. Theres a picture of Karl Bohm. I also played with him at the Met, where he managed to follow Strauss’s dictum about making Salome a scherzo, I mean, he did it that way. But one of the things I was always trying to figure out what is it that really makes a fine, a really fine conductor, and my working conclusion, is that is has to do with knowing the music, and that somehow or other a conductor with poor technique and an inability to rehearse well, because of intense knowledge of a piece, somehow or other it crosses the stand. This is another conductor I worked with, Ernest Ansermet. With whom I remember doing a Daphnes and Chloe Suite. To come into contact with this level of musician, and it goes on and on, a picture I wanted to come up with Aram Khachaturian, who conducted the orchestra in an entire Khachaturian concert, and I remember him so fondly as this big bear with big bushy black eyebrows and his admonition of how to play. He didn’t speak any English, and at that time, now it would be very different, but at that time there was no one in the orchestra who spoke Russian, and he had a translator who knew Russian extremely well, and English extremely well, but didn’t know music, and so everything she said was funny. And . . . so after about a half of a rehearsal the manager finally had enough sense to dispense with her, and said “no,” “yes,” and gestures, and singing. We got along extremely well with Khachaturian. We also did whole concerts with Berio, with Henze, there’s a wonderful Stokowski concert in there somewhere with a big piece by Earle Brown, that Earle ended up conducting. There was a concert Mathias Bamert, had written a piece for him, Mathias is now a very well-known conductor. I remember that very fondly, because they had two violin solos, and I was one of them. But, we had week after week this kind of presence of some of the finest people and how they came to music, how they approached it, how they worked. And of course I do believe that there is no way for a composer to know how your music is going to sound, you need a tremendous amount of experience, there’s just no substitute for it. Particularly with synthesizers, because they don’t have the weight and volume of an orchestra. They don’t have the quality, although they’re getting awfully good.

AG:

I’m struck listening to you and... some of your greatest success has been as an orchestral composer. How much the practical experience of life within an unusually imaginative

orchestra helped shaped you and shaped your thinking. How much the practical experience of being an orchestral musician helped guide you in writing orchestral music.

ETZ:

Well quite, in two ways, basically. I remember the first orchestra I played in was in my junior high school and it was just awful, but gosh when you had all those people playing there was something about it was very striking to me and I played in orchestra not because I couldn't make it as a soloist, but I enjoyed it. I love the orchestra. To me it's like this wonderful, rich palette, there's just so much there. And the more people say it's dead the more I believe there is in it. It's a wonderful resource, and I love it, and I love that you have all these different tunings, and different personality types on the stage, and the whole thing, and when it works it's like a pulsating organism of over a hundred people. I love to write for the orchestra, and I think I loved playing in an orchestra, and that's a part of it. But certainly knowing what it feels like to play, there are certain things, for instance: I was always very conscientious and I once left one of the only existing first violin parts to Ilya Murometz on the subway, which I never got back, and I took it home to work on it. For instance it was a contemporary piece. If I went home and woodshed something and really got to playing it well, and then you find yourself swamped in the orchestra where it wouldn't matter what you played at all, which happens rather frequently with contemporary music, I would never do that to somebody. My music is hard, it's much harder than it looks, but I want it to be rewarding so that if you master it, then it sounds and it speaks, and it's been a persistent preoccupation of mine to let instruments speak, and much of the experience I had, I also played a lot of contemporary chamber music too, much of my experience is that there are lots of pieces that are wonderful pieces, but instrumentally they choke up an instrument, or they don't liberate it, they don't let it, as I say, speak, and that's been a persistent preoccupation of mine, and I'm sure it comes out of that.

AG:

In my experience there are times when an orchestra almost naturally regards a composer as an adversary, especially a composer that may demand awkward things or unflattering things from them as individual instrumentalists, so there's occasionally an us and them mentality, between composer and orchestra. I would imagine it's impossible for you to have that, because once you've been one of them that never quite leaves you, and the practical reality of performance can't be very far from the abstract process of writing for you.

ETZ:

Well, I'm always, when I'm writing, I'm hearing it, and I'm writing things that I hear. And when I'm writing for instance, I mentioned my bassoon concerto: This is an instrument, I don't only know how you play it, I don't know why you would play it. It's like, "who would do this," I want to say! But before I wrote my concerto, I felt like I had sort of become one with the instrument so that if I opened my mouth I was convinced that a bassoon sound was going to come out of it. And I like that feeling. Now maybe I think there's a difference, like I said before, between making a real challenge for a performer, that not everyone can meet, and if they can't meet it, they don't like you, it's true. But if they can meet it AND it makes them sound good then that's a nice relationship. I've had very nice relationships with orchestras. You know the Philharmonic, and everything they've done of mine has been really really...I felt lots coming back and people giving more than the minimum, you know.

AG:

Let's backtrack a little first with you as a violinist who came to study in NY with Ivan Galamian. Let's talk about that, and then we'll turn to your composition studies in just a minute. Talk about your work with Galamian as a violinist.

ETZ:

Well I'd gotten more and more interested in the literature particularly the chamber literature of the violin and I wanted to play it. And I had gotten to a point where I was either going to take the fiddle and break it over my knee into a million pieces or I was going to play it better. And Galamian was the guy that I thought would, he had such a wonderful method of study and practice, and I thought that this was exactly what I needed. I also had longed to come to New York for a variety of other reasons. I think it often amuses me in an odd sort of way, when people talk about how so many of the artists' grants and things come to New York. Well most of my friends were not born here, we all came here, because it's a magnet. It was a magnet for composers, and performers and people who wanted to test themselves against a higher level. So I'd always wanted to come to New York and I just sort of pulled up stakes, in fact I had one little picture of me as I played games getting on the train with my violin, and I guess probably all my worldly possessions. I moved up here.

AG:

Is the picture here?

ETZ:

No. It's too tiny. It's really too tiny.

AG:

Was Galamian a good teacher for you? The right teacher when you worked with him.

ETZ:

Oh yeah, he was just right for me and I worked mostly with one of his assistants, but it was just what I needed because I had never had good schooling on the violin, I had just somehow played it I played better than I had any right to play but I had never been really schooled. But that was, I was still writing, but I was spending my time practicing quite a while.

AG:

And while you were still writing you came into contact with two huge figures in the music of our time, both of whom became your teachers: Roger Session and Elliott Carter. Talk about how you met them, how you came to work with them, and what that was like.

ETZ:

It's funny it just occurs to me; it's almost the same thing as with the violin, when I decided really to try to make another step up. The same thing happened with composition. I had written a fair number of pieces, I'd even had orchestral performances although I wrote a master's thesis for symphonic band because we had a wonderful symphonic band and a pretty good orchestra. I had won three prizes from the Florida Composers' League and I had, people told me they liked my pieces, people were playing a couple of them, but I had never written a piece, that I said, [snap] "I nailed it. I did what I set out to do." And so when I was in my late twenties I was at that time also teaching, as well as playing fiddle here in New York, I decided to get a doctorate, and I figured I'm just going to put aside all of the existential questions, like "does anybody want me to write music?," and let's see if I can't do something and actually feel that I've written a piece that I really wanted to write. And I went to Juilliard, I auditioned for Juilliard and I got in and it was a wonderful, wonderful experience. I worked mostly with Roger, I have an absolutely horrific picture of me with him, but it's such a, this is us in front of Juilliard; I think you were the one who said I was very brave to show this photo. But you see this is so much his character; I loved

Roger, he was such a wonderful…I'm sorry. And looking at this picture you just . . . the next thing is the smell of tobacco, he'd put his hand in his pocket and it would come up sort of brownish-green. Here's a picture of Elliott and me, and also in front of Juilliard.

AG:

You should show some of the photos you took as well.

ETZ:

These are pictures I took, black and whites, this is (how do you want to work this) Camera man's voice: This is fine.

ETZ:

This is I think a nice picture of Roger, I hope my hand is still. We could put them on that music stand over there. This . . . the lighting isn't good, but I like this picture. And here he is, this picture was actually on a book cover. Here's another. He was a great man, I really loved him. And the peculiar thing is, I've never been able to say exactly what it is I got from him, because he didn't have a system, he didn't have any particular stylistic expectations. He was very laconic, he was not the kind of composition teacher who jumped in and said you could do this or you could do that…. he would sit there, I mean my first lesson was a total silence.

AG:

(Laughs) That must have been daunting.

ETZ:

Oh, it was very daunting. I was working on an orchestra piece, and my first lesson consisted of "Is this a B-flat or an A-flat?" I'd look at it, "A-flat." "Oh." "Is this harp or celeste?" He'd turn a few more pages. "Is this E-flat clarinet or B-flat clarinet?" And he had the, I don't know, the composure to wait until he felt he had something special to say about what he was looking at. He waited a lesson and a half. Of course I was a nervous wreck, but it was a wonderful, wonderful lesson, because at one point then he closed the score and said, "Now I think I know what you're getting at; let's talk about it." And he was like an older friend who stood by you. I felt that while I was with him I found who I was, and I don't know exactly how that was done but it happened and it happened in his presence and I think because of him. Here are some pictures I took of Elliott Carter. These are all about the same vintage. I think I did these about 1980. This one I like. Elliott of course is a richly

interesting person. I worked with him only a short time but we've stayed friends. Here's a kinda special picture of Elliott and Helen Carter. This of course is in their house, here in the city.
[break in tape]

ETZ:

…is that I realized that composers normally have, when the picture of you that's in the program, when everybody says you've got to get a new photo, you go ahead and get a new photo. And it's usually a posed sort of thing, and it doesn't look like you. Well conductors have these wonderful pictures of themselves doing something, so I thought it would be nice to make some pictures…

AG:

Of other composers, yeah.
EZ: I did Kurtag also, I have nice pictures of Kurtag.

AG:

We do? We should see those. It just would be nice to see a picture and a program of Carter or Sessions. That says photo by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

ETZ:

Well, this one is actually on a book.

AG:

That's wonderful.

ETZ:

I like that, because there's a presence, and I was talking to him, we were discussing music or something. There's a sense, it's not just a picture of a, pardon me, an old man, it's a picture of a person with strength. But . . . .

AG:

Animated, I'm fascinated by . . .

ETZ:

I, I…

AG:

I want to know more about Sessions, because just from listening to you talk about him, it's very clear how important he was and is to you and the fact that he must have been a very generous teacher. His own music is uniquely his and very different than any of his students and if there is such a thing as a school of Sessions it doesn't have to be one style.

ETZ:

Oh, no, no, it would be like a . . . I don't know what you'd have but one of the most beautiful illustrations I've ever seen, a couple of years ago they had a forum at Juilliard where Milton Babbitt and David Diamond both spoke. Milton and David are about the same vintage; they were both Roger Sessions students.

AG:

well, there's a good range right there . . .

ETZ:

And, you could see that these two men had absolutely nothing whatsoever in common. You wouldn't have to know their music to know that. Two totally different perspectives. Each one is outraged by something the other believes or thinks or writes, and I think that's an incredible mark in his favor. I think that if you look at the list of his students we're all over the map, but it's a rather long list of students who've accomplished something, who've gotten some kind of recognition as composers. And it's remarkable. I think he was probably a little more doctrinaire in the early years than he was later. But he was a very unusual, very quiet, presence that was an enabler in some way. He didn't praise you. I mean his idea of praise was, "So far, so good." This is, I mean he said, when he once told me I had written a striking piece. That's like somebody else jumping up and down, and saying this is the greatest masterpiece. I mean he never, he was very quiet, he was a philosophical person. He was interested in literature and philosophy. Carter also, of course, he was also quite interested in poetry and visual arts. And I think that a great thing about both of them was that these were cultured people, not just note pickers. There was a sense that what you were doing in some way is a cultural activity. That it is on some level an intellectual activity, it's an art in a sort of a higher sense. I had a wonderful time at Juilliard and…

AG:

You talked about, up to that point never quite feeling that you had the experience or the set of skills completely polished to have a piece that in which you would step back and say “Ah, there, there I’ve gotten it.” What are the earliest of your pieces, or is there a…

ETZ:

1971 I wrote a piece, I said, I did exactly what I wanted to do. I mean this is a terrible thing to tell some young composers sometimes; and I look back, and some of the things I wrote earlier I see them when I move, because I sort of threw them away, but then they’re not really thrown away. They’re not all that bad in any sense, it’s just that I had, there was like a hump to get over, to have a sense that this is my voice, this is what I want to say right now. And even as you change your mind and you evolve in a different direction perhaps, you still look back and you say that’s, there’s something sort of existentially valid, this is it, not just the best I could do at that moment, but this is me. This is what I want to say, and I said it.

AG:

What was the piece?

ETZ:

[Laughing] That's the piece I was telling you about, a song cycle I wrote for baritone and piano called Einsame Nacht. And I wrote that for the silliest of reasons. There was a wonderful voice teacher at Juilliard named Madame Freschl and Madame had this theory that the Juilliard composers wrote operas before they had written a scene, before they had written a song, and she accosted me in the hallway one day with a book of Hesse poetry and said “Here honey, go write a song.” [Laughter] And she was not a person to whom you’d say excuse me, you’d say OK, thank you very much; and I’m kind of an avid poetry reader, I always have been. I almost never, ever find anything I want to set, I just like to read it; I don’t want to mess with it. And I took these poems, it was a book with German on one side and very fine translations by James Wright on the other, and I took it home, and I thought, well, I’ll humor the old lady and I read through the thing and I thought I’d turn down a leaf if I thought there was something that I might be interested in. And by the end of it, I’d turned down about fifteen leaves; it was amazing. Partly because the poetry’s very open, it’s not really perfect poetry, and there’s room. That’s a very long uninteresting story but I ended up doing a whole cycle on it for baritone and piano.

AG:

How much, for how much longer did you go on actively being the violinist and the composer. Where was the point where one began to pass the other, in this case composition, and was there a point at which for a moment of realization you finally said to yourself, you know, “composition is what I need to do and want to do; And I’m a composer, and it needs now to take central place in my life.”

ETZ:

Yes, as a matter of fact there was. When I was getting my doctorate at Juilliard when I look back I don’t know how I did it because I was teaching and playing, and one wonderful thing is that up to that point I had been very fragile when working. I had to have quiet, I had to have this, I had to have that, and I got to be able to work, I wrote a lot of music in the basement of the Metropolitan Opera.

AG:

Where you were playing regularly?

ETZ:

I played in the stage band, but my husband was in the orchestra. And I would turn off the squawk box, you’re not going to get Salome coming over this thing, but you’ll get “would the slaves please shut up I can hear you on stage,” whatever, but I was able to, I broke the hump of being fragile as a composer, and being able to work in a lot of different circumstances. But when I got my doctorate at Juilliard, I decided to, just to see what I could do as a composer. I had, up to that point my entire life I had been on somebody else’s schedule: I was either in school or I was teaching, or I was playing and what I did as a composer had to fit in. And there was a moment that I will never forget where I had gone for a job, a university position, and I had liked the deptartment chairman very much, I thought this was somebody I could work for easily, and we could get along. I understand him, and he understands me, and I felt they were going to offer me this job, and I thought, and I thought, and I thought, and I decided to turn it down before they offered it to me. So I called him up and I said, “I don’t want you to offer this to me, because I’m going to say no. And it’s not because of you; it’s because of me.” That I really just want to give it a shot. And when I hung up that phone I felt the most wonderful sense of relief; it was the most amazing thing. And then of course I had to confront: Gee! What am I going to be like, what’s life going to be like at this point.

AG:

When was that?

ETZ:

1975. You know a lot of people say, well if I didn't have to do this, if I didn't have a job I'd paint, whatever, but to put it on the line. I wanted to do it psychicly, also. I don't want any excuses, I don't want anything. If I don't, if my works aren't good works, it's not because they're not getting 100% of me. And it turned out to be the happiest decision I've ever made, and luckily - I'm looking for wood to knock on - luckily, things worked out. It was quite an incredible gamble but I, of course, had the fiddle. And I sort of tapered off from that.

AG:

But that's an extraordinary decision and one that not very many composers have had the courage to make. Even some of the best known composers in America can fall back on the security of a university position and salary, and in your mid-30s to make that decision and of course you've now stuck to your guns completely for 25 years in terms of formal institutional affiliations. I remember when we met and first talked, it was in the early 80s or mid 80s, in Los Angeles, and I remember negotiating just the practical arrangements of your coming to hear Andre Previn conduct your Celebration to open his term as music director at Los Angeles, and you were very clear and very forthright that you made your living as a composer and that coming and sitting and attending a performance was financially for you time away from doing your work as a composer, and that's very vivid and rather than have a negative effect it had a very positive effect in thinking and in how one views what a composer does, and I'm still very much struck that at 35 years of age "no, I'm not going to take a teaching job, no I'm not going to be a permanent free-lance violinist, I am going to be a composer."

ETZ:

Well it's one of those things, if it had turned out differently you'd probably be kicking yourself, but I was happy, I was happy.

AG:

But it couldn't have turned out this way unless unless you had made that decision.

ETZ:

Yeah, and it's sort of like I just needed to either be knocked down and off my feet and not able to get back up, sort of, and then I would have settled down and done a normal thing. I have to say that I was greatly helped by foundations at the beginning of all of this. When I got my Guggenheim, for instance, that was a very, very helpful thing.

AG:

And when was that?

ETZ:

That wasn't until 1980. And the small commissions I had coming in and things like that were very, very helpful. It's a . . . it's so funny, I mean, for me composing is not just like a technical activity, although there are just so many things to think about. And I worry as much as anybody about the techniques of it all, and there's just so much to know, because we never quite know enough. Which is for me, a stimulus, it makes me want to. But at heart, for me, it's something very personal and important, and it's not what I do, it's sort of who I am, and that clarifies a lot of decision that I make. For instance, I seldom hear performances of my music, and my music gets played an awful lot that I never hear because I don't want to stop being a composer and run around and just listen.

AG:

In a panel the other day, when we were talking with your fellow composers I was struck by the chronology of a couple of things: first this question of when you made the decision in your head that "I'm going to focus on being a composer, and so be it, that's what I am." And then unrelated I had asked the question about when each of you had sensed a moment of arrival in which you thought hey maybe I can make it as a composer, I can be a composer. And that significantly, for you, followed a year after you had made the decision to focus. What was that point of arrival . . .

ETZ:

That was the ISCM, the World Music Days, which is the International Society for Contemporary Music, which is a wonderful old organization from the 20s I think, every year they have a World Music Days, and this was the first time it was going to be held in the states. It was held in Boston and my string quartet of 1974 was selected for a performance there and it offered me an incredible opportunity, I mean, I knew it was going

to be important, but I didn't even realize how important, because of who was there. Not only did we have press from all over the world and that, we had musicians from all over the world, the things, some things got talked about, and things led from that performance, not so much from the fine reviews that my piece got but from the fact that the musicians that were in the audience, like Richard Pittman, from Boston's Musica Viva. This almost leads very, in a very nice segue to the first Carnegie Hall performance that I had. Because after I had this wonderful opportunity with the ISCM World Music Days, when they came to me and said "will you be on the board in New York?" I couldn't very well say no. So I was on the board for a couple of years, and I had a few performances related to that. This was '79 when the League did my Sonata in Three Movements for Violin and Piano. And there's a few things about this that are kind of… One is that the piece is…This piece was written for my husband, the violinist Joseph Zwilich to play, and this is actually a program from the first performance, which was in Scotland, and there's a picture of Joe. And this was the program of the very first performance. This was written for him to play and actually finished in a London taxi cab, on a concert tour. And he died in 1979. He had actually been supposed to play on this concert of the ISCM and at the last minute they asked a young violinist who I knew from Juilliard, named Eugene Drucker, to play. And Gene is, of course, a violinist in the Emerson String Quartet. Now. . .

AG:

It's amazing how things come full circle. Here's a concert twenty years ago in Carnegie recital hall which is now, of course, Weill Recital Hall, you've now been the holder of the Composers' Chair for four years, and the producer and presenter of contemporary music concerts in the hall where you had your first Carnegie performance. Last December, nineteen years after this, Eugene Drucker played the world premiere of your second string quartet, commissioned by Carnegie Hall, so life has its wonderful, full, satisfying circles,

ETZ:

Yeah. Yeah.

AG:

Before we leave the subject, we shouldn't leave the subject of your violin sonata without touching upon your husband Joe, and your marriage. How you met, and how he played a role in your life if he did, in your activities as a composer, and then I know that his very sad and untimely death also had kind of creative ramification in your work and in the years after.

ETZ:

Well actually Joe and I actually met at the Carnegie tavern. Which was kind of like a German beer hall, which was under where the musicians' rooms and dressing rooms are now. And it was the kind of place that had, beer, and hot roast beef sandwiches, you know, and that kind of thing, and everybody went there, all the musicians went there. From the highest level to the lowest, and I actually met him there after I had played a concert with the American Symphony and he had played the opera and he came there. But we, actually he tried to take me home, but I was with a date. And we later, someone fixed us up, and we hit it off, and Joe and I were married for ten years. And well, he was a wonderful friend and that piece was a commission, in the sense that I was talking about the other day, where he said, if you write me a piece I'll play it on my next European tour. So I wrote him a piece. He also conducted a piece of mine and we…and it was a nice musical collaboration as well as a personal relationship. He was kinda one of my first fans, as a matter of fact Gene Drucker's father, who also played at the Met, came up to me, apparently Joe was always saying, my wife is a wonderful composer, and Ernie, Gene's father, came up to me after they premiered my double quartet at the Chamber Music Society in '84, and he said, "you know, Joe was right." But, it was, it's something that it's very hard for me to talk about. People have, everybody seems to have noticed the big change in my musical style and I guess I do too notice that. And it was that when Joe died, and he died at the Met, as he and I were spectators at the Stuttgart Opera, I mean Ballet, and . . . I was writing a piece for the Boston Musica Viva at the time, and this was a piece that had gotten commission because of the performance in the World Music Days in '76, and it was due, I think the concert was in November, Joe died in June, and I just couldn't do anything for a very long time. As a matter of fact, I had a performance at Tanglewood. Otto Luening was very kind to me, he was someone who I had known from Juilliard also, and he called me up and he said "I see your name on the schedule and you're certainly going to go," and I said "I don't know Otto." And he said, "well, you make yourself go. And go to this on Monday night, and go to that, and say hello to this person, and that person." I actually got myself there and I functioned except for having to bawl like a baby in the middle of the Mozart clarinet concerto with the Boston symphony. But when I went back the next year, it was like I'd never been there. I didn't remember; I must have been in a kind of state. Anyway, I couldn't write for quite a while, and then when I got back to writing, which I had to do to make this performance, I was such a different person I had to start over. And I had very good advice from a composer friend of mine, Harold Shiffman, whom I'd known since I was a teenager, and I said to Harold, this has to be a

memorial and he said, “Oh! Don’t. Write the damn piece, get to the double bar, finish it, put it aside. It’s too early.” It was wonderful, wonderful advice. ‘Cause I didn’t think, I really did just try to finish the piece. And of course it turned out to be a memorial. But I think I came to grips at that point with not only with how much music meant to me, and to be able to compose meant to me, but that it performed some function for me, that it was a way of me dealing with the world, in some kind of way, and it got me very, very centered. And I think that any time you go through something like that you also either come out much stronger or much weaker. And one of the things that happens, or it happened to me and others that have been through something similar, and that is that there are so many things that people worry about, and the styles, and what’s hip, and what’s the flavor of the month, and careers, and this and that, and that you just have a different set of priorities, you come out of this and it’s very clear, you just look over all kinds of things and say this is important, this is not. And some of the things that no longer seemed important to me. I followed very strongly my, my . . . . at any rate, my music, my style opened up a great deal I think.

AG:

Is that the work that they recorded?

ETZ:

The chamber symphony, yeah.

AG:

Significantly enough, that’s the first piece of yours I knew.

ETZ:

Really.

AG:

Because of that recording. So it was a different kind of turning point, certainly not one that you would have planned in any way.

ETZ:

No. But it and writing for Boston Musica Viva was something very special, because now we’ve had a twenty-year relationship, very close, and they were one of the first groups that did repeat performances. I don’t know how many times they played that piece, but they

really have played it a lot. And they commissioned the second piece; they commissioned Passages, which they've also played whenever they could. One gets so much from that.

AG:

The Violin Sonata...
[break in tape]

AG:

… the sonata still remains one of your most frequently performed works. I look at the Carnegie Hall performance history and it's had almost twenty consecutive years of performances, it was played by Michele Makarski as both part of the Carnegie Hall American Music competition and as part of her prize-winning recital. It was played just last year in the Distinctive Debut series by Robin Sharp and Jeremy Denk. It still obviously retains its currency

ETZ:

Yeah, it's out there, it's been reprinted I don't know how many times. What I should say at this point because this is an important historical fact: Carnegie Hall with, I think it was through the Rockefeller Foundation, sponsored a contest for a, I mean they never came up with a sexy title, it was always like the International American Competition for American Music, or something, and my violin sonata got on the repertoire list and that was an incredible shot in the arm for me as a composer, because when you look at the violin repertoire instead of saying, a violinist saying, "should I learn this new piece by somebody I don't know or should I learn the Brahms A Major, I haven't played that yet," chances are they're going to go with the repertoire that they might reasonably live with the next forty years. But when they're choosing which American piece do I want to learn that puts a whole new perspective on it, and I've found that not only for myself but I think for John Corigliano, George Rochberg, any number of composers, this contest got these pieces, just kicked them right into the mainstream and there are even more performances, because I think the first year of the competition was 1983, and two of the finalists played it that I know of: Gerardo Ribiero, and Richard Young. This was a very important function of Carnegie Hall in getting music out there. It's a shame that the competition stopped because competitions are very bizarre, you know, you can hold the perfect competition and not have the winner, really get what you expected out of it but sometimes these unintended consequences are very interesting, and I think that this had a very positive effect on kicking some violin pieces into the repertoire, and voice and piano.

AG:

Just sticking now with the chronology that we've been talking about, I noticed in Carnegie the Intrada that was done by the DaCapo Players a couple of times in the mid-80s. Talk a little bit about that piece and the association with the DaCapo Chamber Players.

ETZ:

We'll they're all friends of mine. As a matter of fact Andre Emilianoff, the cellist, played in my Making Music concert. And they got a small commission from Chamber Music America and asked me if I'd write a piece. And I said "well, what do you need?" And they said, "more than anything we need a little, a short opener." And I said "Boy, do you," because I'd been to many contemporary chamber ensemble concerts where they start with my Chamber Symphony and I thought that's not the place for it, but then when I look at the program I say, well, that's where I would put it too because there is nothing to go first. So I wrote a little piece that is intended like a little overture of chamber music, and since I wrote it in Italy, at Bellagio, I gave it an Italian title, Intrada.

AG:

And it's obviously a piece for which you retain affection since you did include it in your Making Music . . .

ETZ:

Yeah, it is what it is. I'm trying to think. Probably my next important performance at Carnegie Hall after the violin sonata and also the string quartet was done here in the ISCM and I think something else.

AG:

In '77, the New York String Quartet, April of '77.

ETZ:

There was a string quartet . . .

AG:

The first string quartet...
ETA: in '74. Actually it's not the first, actually I have a zero, actually I have a zero and a minus one . . .

AG:

(laughter)

ETZ:

I wrote one when I was in college and I wrote another one when I was in high school, and I don't count any of them. But my first . . . oh, we lost it, oh, this is Recital Hall… my first big hall performance was with the American Symphony under Kazuyoshi Akiyama in 1978, a piece called Symposium for Orchestra, this is a wild program by the way, if you could hold that, I'll get a picture . . .

AG:

Saint-Saens Third Violin Concerto with Young Uk Kim and the Bach-Schoenberg "St. Anne" Prelude and Fugue and the Firebird Suite. How did that performance come about?

ETZ:

Well, somebody, it might even have been me, got my music to Akiyama, this is a picture of him at that time, a fine Japanese conductor. We were musing at the time of this performance, we're about the same age, how our fathers could have killed each other in the war and here we were close enough to be composer and performer. At any rate the . . . another interesting connection is that the premiere performance of Symposium for Orchestra was conducted by Pierre Boulez, who will be coming in as composer's chair, and whose work is I guess known to everyone.

AG:

Talk about that performance too, what was the . . .

ETZ:

That was at Juilliard in a Festival and it was with the Juilliard Orchestra in Tully Hall in '75, I think January of '75 . . .

AG:

Was that the first performance?

ETZ:

Oh yeah . . . the very first performance and the last until ’78; it was a very large orchestra . . . the stage manager said to us . . . I had to go out and talk with him about some things. He said, “There’s only one way out: Go to the harps and make a right.” It was a wonderful performance and it was a great thrill for me to have Boulez do my piece and he brought a great deal to it, and it was quite a remarkable moment.

AG:

That had to have been another moment of arrival because that was the same year as your ISCM concert or selection . . .

ETZ:

The year before, yeah.

AG:

’75, and I was just going to say that we’ve mostly been talking about small-scale pieces but to have an orchestral piece done under those prestigious circumstances in your mid-thirties is still a relatively unusual . . .

ETZ:

And particularly in those days when people were saying you can’t write for orchestra.

AG:

And this was a performance conducted by the then music director of the New York Philharmonic.

ETZ:

And conducted beautifully, I mean it really was a wonderful performance. That piece is dedicated to Pierre...

AG:

So there’s a...

ETZ:

...with great affection

AG:

There's a link we should absolutely have a copy of that score in the archives from one composers' chair to the other.

ETZ:

How are we doing with time and all . . . We're doing pretty good.

AG:

We're doing well. I still have a ton of questions for you.

ETZ:

OK.

AG:

Let's sit and just talk about writing for orchestra, and if that's always been a part of your musical thinking. It would seem to me that sometimes for young composers, that the practical investment in an orchestral piece when there isn't an imminent performance, is huge. It's more time consuming, the physical labor of producing orchestra parts, and an orchestral score is huge and it's certainly easier to write a small chamber work for friends who you know are going to perform than think orchestrally with an uncertain future, but for you even before your prominence and regular performances by orchestras, you were writing for orchestras, and thinking for orchestras.

ETZ:

Yeah, as a matter of fact, another, . . . you could look at my life and say it is wise to do the impractical things. When I had my Guggenheim in 1980, I was at the MacDowell Colony for a couple of months and I said to myself, "here I am I'm at the MacDowell Colony, I've got a Guggenheim, what else to do but to start a big orchestra piece?" Nobody wanted it, nobody was asking for it . . . so I spent my two months at the MacDowell Colony really hatching a large-scale piece for orchestra, and kind of bringing to it a new way of thinking about the orchestra for me. After I left the MacDowell Colony I then . . . I had had a commission from Boston Musica Viva, which turned out to be Passages, a work for voice and mixed ensemble based on poetry of A. R. Ammons, I had to leave this big orchestra piece and write Passages, and when I finished that, Francis Thorne of the American Composers' Orchestra came to me and said, "we have a kind of a small commission. Do you want to write a piece for orchestra?" And I said, "Boy, do I." And it was a fairly close deadline . . . I don't remember what it was exactly, but I said "I

sure do." And that turned out to be my First Symphony, which turned out to win the Pulitzer Prize. And that really was very helpful in bringing my work to the orchestral community.

AG:

It is amazing as with a couple of other turning points in your life that the courage of your convictions at a critical moment led to something fairly enormous in this case an orchestral piece that really became your calling card to a wider musical world.

ETZ:

As a matter of fact, you were in LA when Previn did that with the LA Philharmonic. We go back to . . .

AG:

And the '80s, for you, became a real decade of wide-spread recognition particularly in the orchestral world. And suddenly many of the major orchestras, with many major conductors were doing your work. Talk about that experience and some of the things that stand out, not only the works but collaborations with orchestras and conductors that stand out.

ETZ:

Well, it's been very remarkable, and a lot of people have done my first symphony. John Nelson made a wonderful recording . . . Gunther Schuller premiered it with the American Composers Orchestra, and John Nelson made a fine recording with Indianapolis and there again, John and I have, as Gunther and I have, remained close colleagues for these many years. John just did Prologue and Variations in Köln, I think about a month ago and continues to perform my music. I had a performance here with Hans Vonk in . . .

AG:

'97

ETZ:

Something like that, of the First Symphony. It's been really quite wonderful for me to have been able to have the high level of performance and I've had wonderful luck with conductors really learning my music, and doing extraordinarily well. I think winning the Pulitzer Prize for an orchestral piece was a great help in getting orchestras interested in commissioning, and my Second Symphony was commissioned by San Francisco. My Third was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic. And I've done a series of

concertos. I would have to say this has been a great experience for me and for Pittsburgh with Maazel, as I mentioned, and Chicago with both Solti and Barenboim. In fact I have a really kind of a nice picture here of . . . this is the American Composers Orchestra did the New York premiere at Carnegie Hall of my Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra with Christian Lindberg . . . have you heard him play?

AG:

Yeah, he is an amazing . . .

ETZ:

He is truly amazing. This is about a twenty, twenty-two minute piece. He showed up at rehearsal with . . . it's a hard piece . . . it's a real virtuoso trombone piece. He showed up at rehearsal without notes and you could say, Dennis could say start five before B and he knew . . . that's how.

AG:

the degree to which he'd memorized

ETZ:

stunning, stunning player. He recorded it actually on BIS, but I don't have a picture from that, but I do have a picture from the premiere, and here is me, and one of those little outfits I've got to wear, and the principal trombone of the Chicago Symphony, Jay Friedman, the orchestra, and here is Sir Georg Solti.

AG:

It looks like a very happy moment.

ETZ:

It was a lovely, lovely moment. And I must say I don't . . . many of my colleagues have these horror stories about conductors and orchestras, I don't have any. I have really had very good experiences. Now Solti, when he did this he was, this was '88 probably, he was in his eighties and yet he had taken the time to really learn my piece and give it his best shot. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience.

AG:

While we're here, let's take a moment and tour through some of these other Carnegie Hall performances.

ETZ:

O.K. Well, this was a world premiere at Carnegie Hall. Fantasy for Harpsichord it was commissioned by the Concert Artists' Guild which is an organization that sponsors, has kind of a contest for young performers and then sponsors them. Linda is a fine harpsichordist.

AG:

Linda Kobler.

ETZ:

Yes. And I wrote a Fantasy for Harpsichord for her that was premiered here as I recall that was April 10th was the same night Prologue and Variations was premiered by the Chattanooga Symphony and I was there instead. There's, there's Murphy's Law about that: If you have only eight performances a year, two of them are going to be on the same night. I've had even, when the Philharmonic premiered my Third Symphony I had Galway playing my flute concerto in Phoenix, and Zdenck was doing Celebration in Minnesota, the very same night. Unfair!

AG:

That has to be another great moment of arrival for a composer, when you actually have to choose between...

ETZ:

Oh Yes! It really is!

AG:

...premieres or performances

ETZ:

I remember when I was preparing my doctoral recital at Juilliard the notion that there were rehearsals going on in the building in four or five different rooms of my pieces was about as exciting . . . I don't know . . . it was something wonderful about that. Interestingly

enough Concert Artists Guild, their latest ensemble that they're supporting is the Eighth Blackbird, who just appeared on our Focus on Four concert: a stunning ensemble.

AG:

Yeah. They're wonderful.

ETZ:

I think this is old. Yep.

AG:

Here's Milwaukee Symphony doing Celebration, in '89

ETZ:

...with Zdenck, I've had about two hundred performances of Celebration. And . . .

AG:

That's astonishing.

ETZ:

…Zdenck seems to be responsible for at least 25. [Laughs.] That piece was written for John Nelson in Indianapolis to open the Circle Theater. And people, I mean like you mentioned Andre Previn used it in Los Angeles to open his tenure there, and it gets used a lot for celebratory events. This is something very special, this goes back to a performance in the main hall in '87. And what is extremely special about this - if you could hold it I'll get the other stuff - this was a joint commission from Carnegie Hall, the Detroit Symphony, and the American Symphony Orchestra League. And the way it worked is that the winner of the Carnegie Hall, whatever they were calling it, American Repertoire for Pianists Competition, the pianist who won that award got to play the premiere and it was with the Detroit Symphony and it was at the ASOL convention, which that year was in Meadowbrook. I don't know where that, I had a . . . . Oh here it is, I left it in the score, naturally: This is the score, this was a Carnegie Hall co-commission in 86 and here's me at Meadowbrook, that's the Detroit Symphony in the background. This is my "Quarter to three" picture. Because on the original you can see the time it's quarter to three. And here's a picture in the Carnegie, the Café Carnegie which is still here. This is Gunther Herbig, the conductor who conducted the first performance and conducted here in Carnegie, me, and Issac Stern with cigar, of course. This was at the press conference

announcing the commission. And I wish I had, I couldn't find any pictures of Mark and Gunther. Marc-Andre Hamelin, a wonderful, young, Canadian pianist was the one who played the premiere, and he got to play it quite a few places, which is very nice. Let's see.

AG:

These look like they have nice photos attached to them.

ETZ:

This is my horn concerto. This was also premiered elsewhere but the New York premiere was in the main hall. It was written for, Orpheus is one of the co-commissioners, it was written for David Jolley and here's a program from the New York premiere of my concerto for horn and string orchestra.

AG:

Continuing all the things that come full circle, David Jolley just played in the Focus on Four making music program this past Monday.

ETZ:

And here's a photo of Orpheus at about this time. As you can see, my concert was like '83, I think it was, we were all pretty young and . . . . Let's see what else we have here. Oh here, here's the Cleveland Orchestra commissioned my concerto for oboe and orchestra for their twenty-fifth anniversary of their wonderful John Mack. . . and they played the premiere, of course in Cleveland with Christoph von Dohnanyi conducting. This is really circle within circle because he's the grandson of Erno Dohnanyi that I knew as a teenager, and he also has just very recently conducted my Violin Concerto in Paris with Pam Frank.

AG:

Oh great!

ETZ:

Here's a picture of the Cleveland Orchestra at that time with Christoph. I better take this out of… if I can. No, I don't think I can. What a wonderful orchestra that is. And John is kinda like the dean of oboists. As it happens Christoph hurt his back and Leonard Slatkin conducted.

AG:

Who just a few weeks ago did the Two-piano Concerto.

ETZ:

And here is a picture just from that particular concert, I believe.

AG:

Oh my!

ETZ:

When he conducted Images for two pianos and orchestra here. I love that picture.

AG:

Yeah, it's really terrific.

ETZ:

. . . it's wonderful. Let's see. Here's the New Jersey Symphony, oh, it's the same as this. Here's Zdenck, who did Celebrations, here in, what, '87? He came here with the New Jersey Symphony and the Kalichstein, Laredo, Robinson Trio for the New York premiere in the big hall of my triple concerto for piano, violin, cello, and orchestra. This is a picture of, I did a pre-concert lecture and the KLRs joined me on stage for it. We go back at least ten years further than that also because I wrote my piano trio for them. That also has had quite a number of performances. They played it here in the big hall. The Eroica plays it and the Beaux Arts play it. Lots of people play it. But that's been a wonderful relationship for me with this trio. I wrote the Piano Trio for them, I think it was in '86, and then the Triple Concerto in '96. And in between I wrote a double concerto for Jaime and Sharon. It's been a very lovely musical and now personal relationship. And here's a picture of Zdenck and me in front of Carnegie Hall, prior to the performance of the New Jersey Symphony and the Triple. - Got it? I throw you a challenge every minute, right? - Let's see. Moscow Virtuosi and string orchestra . . . Oh here's another thing that I've been very lucky with. Jaime is doing quite a bit of conducting these days and I have a piece for string orchestra called Prologue and Variations, which is the very thing that conflicted with Linda Kobler's Fantasy. Premiered the same night in '84. And so, Jaime's conducting, also this piece. He's done that quite a few places: Utah Symphony and the New World Symphony, and so that's been a very warm musical relationship.

AG:

Now this catches my eye. The Moscow Virtuosi...

ETZ:

The Moscow Virtuosi.

AG:

...not known for playing a lot of American music.

ETZ:

Oh, they played a wonderful performance of Prologue and Variations. Kind of a small group, and really marvelous. Spivakof is a fine, fine musician. And let's see, this is Eroica, Saint Louis, this is the National Symphony from just a couple of weeks ago with Katia and Marielle Labeque, they did Images for Two Pianos and Orchestra. It's the only time I've ever done this, a piece that's based on paintings in the National Museum of Women in the Arts. I should have brought the insert with it. Pictures. The Eroica Trio, St. Louis, New York Pops: Skitch did a piece of mine recently called Jubilation in a pops concert.

AG:

We'll get to making music...
[break in tape]

ETZ:

…ask the orchestra; it's very funny. She's going to do it in Chicago, with the Chicago Symphony, about five performances in the next couple of weeks.

AG:

Nothing [break in tape] the top draw of stuff here

ETZ:

Carnegie Hall is all about drawers.

AG:

Well, we've just been looking at an amazing round of performances at Carnegie Hall with a wide range of orchestras and chamber musics and that's a very natural transition to the last four years in which you have really created and set the mold for the Carnegie Hall Composers Chair and so we should spend a very significant amount of time going into

that association which is now a rich part of Carnegie Hall's more recent history. How did it come about? How did you find out? How did it begin?

ETZ:

Well it began as many things in music in this town began, at the Russian Tea Room. And Judy Arron invited me to lunch. And I went to lunch and she was there with Kristen Kuhr. I figured that she wanted to get my ideas about something. I've always been known as a friend to Carnegie Hall, so I said OK, and in the course of the lunch she told me that they were thinking of creating a position for a composer. And in the course of the lunch she asked me if I would be that composer. And unlike . . . you know that I have turned down some very significant orchestral residencies. I suppose at this point I could say, I never wanted to hurt anybody's feelings, but Los Angeles Philharmonic, Indianapolis, the New York Philharmonic, and a few others where, with conductors with whom I felt a rapport and you know, it would have meaning. I turned it down because I felt that it was too . . it would take too much away from my work. Although it's tempting in certain respects. But, I just felt that it would not be right with the resolve that I had made. It wasn't right for me. It was right for everybody else, whatever, but it just didn't feel right for me. So I turned down things that I just couldn't believe I was hearing myself say "No." But one of the things you really have to do as a free-lance person is learn how to say no. And I said no, but when Judy asked me I said, "well, let me think about it." And I told her of my interest in being a composer first; I told her of my unwillingness to go through people's scores. I always feel like the person with the name you've never heard before on that pile, that's me. I couldn't stand going through a pile of scores without doing it right. You do it right, it's enormously time-consuming. The notion that I would be a composer first and last and that within that there would be some projects that I could relate to. And that I would have a commission; three years of commissions. And that the first commission would probably be for a family concert. I took it all in and I had seen this wonderful hall in many different ups and downs over my years in New York and I felt that Judy Arron had done some quite remarkable things to bring it together, and not just to dress it up and make it renovated, and look better, and make it more comfortable for musicians back stage and all of that, but the kinds of projects were really meaningful and I saw that it just was an offer I couldn't refuse. I went back and I said: "I'll do it." And so one of the things they had started doing, what they were calling "Conversations with Music" so I came in with my idea which was not just to talk about a piece but on the theory that what Peter tells me about Paul, tells me more about Peter than about Paul that people would loosen up more, I mean nobody's stiffer than me in talking about my music. I've had to learn how to do it, but it's not something

you do easily, and yet I can talk about other music much more easily. So I with the staff here put together the series that we ended up calling “Making Music.” Focusing on a single composer. We picked a doable number. Four concerts a year, a single composer, and all their works, of that composer’s choice. Now I sort of put a thread through it. The first season there was a major piece with a text. The second season there was a string quartet on each concert. And this season except for the last concert, each program had something from the vernacular. And it ranged from the things that people come in with are just wonderful. We’ve heard in addition to Steve Reich, we’ve heard Medieval music on his concert. Alvin Lucier we heard, he brought in a gamelan from Wesleyan, and they played on his concert. Pauline Oliveros brought in a wonderful group called the Cultural Heritage Choir, which is really a chamber vocal group that does field hollers and all kinds of African-influenced things. We’ve had some jazz, we’ve had some cabaret. We’ve had Beethoven, we’ve had Brahms, we’ve had…

AG:

Music from Milton Babbit’s Peter Pan.

ETZ:

Yes! Yes! It’s been, . . . I have enjoyed it very much. And I’ve tried to put something together with this series that treats the audience with respect, they’re grown up, they can make up their own minds. We’re not going to shove anything down their throats but this is what there is, and you react to it in whatever way you do. But I think we’ve managed to create a nice feeling in the hall, particularly since Weill is a very beautiful room and lends itself to, especially since they got rid of that horrible proscenium that was there for so many years and now it’s kind of open, it looks like the living room you’d have if you could and there is a kind of sense of connection with the stage. So these have been concerts of conversation and music with composers that I’ve chosen to represent not just a wide range but people who represent the best of whatever kind of music that they do.

AG:

The range though, which you mentioned, has amazed me. If one were just to take the three years of this series . . . has it been three years?

ETZ:

Yes, three years.

AG:

You could have a fair understanding of the 20th century in American music just from the diversity of styles and the diversity of choices they've made. One of the dangers of composers' residencies, I suppose, is that it can be so closely a reflection of the resident composer's tastes that it can be relatively narrow. You haven't remotely fallen into that trap. You've been very generous with a stylistic spectrum that even within this season goes from Pauline Oliveros on one end to Milton Babbitt. Talk a little more about how you came to select the composers across these seasons.

ETZ:

Well, I just remembered something that Roger, Roger Sessions used to say that may have been a key to his success as a teacher and he said: "I think I'm the one who writes my music the best." Of course, I have my own taste. I tend to like a lot of different music. I'm . . . I don't love a lot of music, but I tend to like a lot of it. The notion of imposing my taste is very foreign to me. I'm a real American kid. I grew up post-WWII and to me it's when the Europeans say things are out of control, I say "Wow, that's wonderful," 'cause it's . . . I like that idea. I like the idea that we're each very different. And I think that the thing that I look for more than anything is a kind of authenticity in a composer. A composer is doing that not because it's been decreed on high that this year such-and-such is in, but because that comes out of this composer's background and experience and loves of different kinds of music and this is exactly what this composer should be doing. And that's kinda what I look for. I suppose, I didn't even think of it in that way. I thought of putting an interesting series together. But I was very touched the other night at the last concert; we've had some subscribers who've been there through thick and thin, who are not new music aficionados and not the normal people you'd see at a new music concert necessarily, but they've been there for everything. Several of them came up to me with big smiles on their faces: they had a wonderful time and they also learned a lot. And I thought, isn't that lovely. It's nice that we were able to bring them something kind of special. So I feel very good about that series and I have found working with people here at Carnegie Hall utterly amazing because with all the institutions I have had some kind of dealing with, I've never seen one that worked like this, where you know you can count on everybody. And they have ideas, and they work hard. If they say they'll do something, they actually do it. So it was great fun putting all of this together with the staff.

AG:

One of the other valuable elements of the many valuable elements of the series is for the audience just to have that informal personal contact with composers, which is something you've also, in representing your own music, have had to do, and as we talked with the young composers at the workshop, it was clear that they each knew how to cultivate that ability to make contact on behalf of their music. Can you talk about the composer personally as an advocate, first for your own music, but then as an advocate for others' music. The composer as spokesman or spokeswoman, if you will.

ETZ:

I want to reel back, because there's something else I want to say about the Making Music Series. And that is we were talking about performers and sort of an antagonism and this and that. For everybody there are some people who just really get your music. And they love it and they want to come back to it; they're not doing it because somebody pays them to do it on Monday night. They're doing it because that's what they want to do. And that was another one of my real concerns with Making Music. That every concert have the best possible people for performing this composer's work, not every composer's work, but who is the best performer for Steve, it would be a different one than for me, and I feel very happy that we were able to do that with the support of Carnegie Hall. That we were able to aim for the sky, and come pretty close. About being an advocate, I think there are a couple of things: I think the general public has no idea what a composer does. They're very curious about us if they know that we exist. If you play your music, or if you stand up and conduct and bow, they kind of figure it out. You're making this music. A lot of people think that the person who is conducting is the composer somehow or other, or the performer. You look at the whole pop thing, the notion of a composer is like a foreign idea. It's the performer's song. I think that probably one of the major advantages of the composers speaking is reminding the audience that there is a mind that put this all together. And it looks pretty much like you and me. This is a person who wore diapers at one point and has hobbies, and it was interesting to read in Peter Davis' article about Milton Babbitt that he hadn't realized how funny he was. And here's someone, Peter, who has a degree in music, and has studied and all of this sort of thing. Just the notion that we're people too and we can be funny or we can be sour, or we can be this or that. I think that's probably as important as what one says to an audience. That they are able to see you as a human being and not a metal or a marble bust. And the other thing is I do think that we have to be advocates. We're all teachers, particularly in the last twenty years when you've seen the programs that normally would educate the young, you've seen them just sort of be, sort of, ruined. Which is another reason I was very happy about the Carnegie Hall situation,

because of the Family Concerts, the emphasis on education and the link-up and going out to schools that's going on. That's important, and we have a role to play; it may be different from composer to composer but we do have a role to play partly because we have a different perspective. When I came here, for instance, I knew the way things move in the concert world, that I wasn't going to be very visible the first year, so I rooted around in things and one of the things I did was I said, "let's see if there's a performance history of Carnegie Hall," and sure enough for the Centennial in 1990 they had done a computer print-out of world premieres and first performances. Well I went through this thing and the idea of the video tape came to me as I'm going through this and I get to the thirties and get past the New World Symphony, the Tchaikovsky, all these incredible premieres that actually took place here, and get into the thirties and it was like, whoa, the first one I encountered was David Diamond. I know David Diamond! I've known him for a number of years. He's still very much with us. And these other names began to pop out. And I thought let's use Carnegie as a sort of, the step-stone to do some kind of video tapes with composers to get them to talk and to talk with another composer, which is very different. There are various oral history projects but it's a little different talking to someone who's a colleague. So I brought up this idea and they jumped at it and as you can see it's a very elaborate . . . we have Nick, we have the sound, we have somebody spending staff time here writing things down; the archives have been gone through; it's a very major kind of production. But I think it's valuable and it might not occur to someone who's not a composer that here's this thing that's left for posterity to do something with. And again, with the focus being Carnegie Hall but it's been talking about music in the second half of the twentieth century and particularly what it's like to be an American working as a composer in this time.

AG:

You said at that first conversation that you made it clear that being a composer was your first duty and your last. You've certainly been true to that; a major element of your association with, your most recent association I should say, given all that we've looked at has been a series of commissions. Can you talk us through each piece, what the genesis was in terms of the idea for the piece and how they've differed from each other and then talk us through the first performances.

ETZ:

Sure. The first thing, as I said, was a family concert piece. And I had never written anything like this. But I thought that it was such a good idea, because you know all of us got hooked on music as children.

AG:

So that was specified by Judy, or Carnegie, the idea of a piece for a family concert?

ETZ:

I think that we all just sort of agreed, that's a good first place to do it. And something very bizarre had happened to me in 1990, and that is that I found myself in the Peanuts cartoon. I should have brought that one along, I didn't think of it. Actually, I didn't have the pleasure or the heart attack of opening the paper and seeing it. I read the New York Times that day and of course they don't have it and I was out of town and I called my machine and it had stopped taking messages. And the first three were "Oh my God! I've seen it." Finally the fourth one was a very hip New York friend who said, in case you don't know it, you're in today's Peanut's cartoon. So I immediately did the dignified thing which was to run to the garbage room and look for a Daily News or The Post. At any rate, two of the little characters, Marcy and Peppermint Patty, were at a concert, and Peppermint Patty is kind of an unwilling concertgoer, and she was sitting in her seat like this and Marcy's reading the program and she says, "this next piece is a Flute Concerto by Ellen Zwilich, who just happens to be a woman." And the last frame little Peppermint Patty is standing on her seat saying "Good Going, Ellen!" So, ... this was a rather shocking experience. And it occurred to me that maybe I could do something with the Peanuts thing, and I had written to Charles Schultz after this happened saying, what do you say, thank you very much. And he had sent me the original cartoon with a very lovely inscription about how he'd like to meet me sometime. Anyway, I was a little shy about it, and so Judy wrote him a letter and asked him if he would be interested in collaborating with me, and he wrote back that he'd love it. So what I decided to do was, ended up being a piece called Peanuts Gallery. And the reasons it's called Peanuts Gallery is that it's a portrait of Peanuts characters, a musical portrait. And of course the first thing had to be Schroeder, because, well, everybody knows why. So the first movement is called "Schroeder's Beethoven Fantasy," the second movement is "Lullaby for Linus," the third movement is "Snoopy does the Samba," the fourth is "Charlie Brown's Lament," then "Lucy Freaks Out," last movement, "Peppermint Patty and Marcy lead the Parade." I had to bring them in since they were the ones who were so encouraging to me in my work. And I decided to do it for a young pianist and orchestra. Although it's been done here by a young Harvard student Albert

Kim who was back playing this evening. Jeffrey Kahane has done it conducting from the keyboard. And I've got a jazz pianist for Chicago Symphony coming up in a couple weeks. At any rate, so I wrote this for Orpheus and it was commissioned for them and Charles Schultz did a nice little cartoon for each movement, and this was premiered on a family concert right here at Carnegie Hall. I later made a solo piano thing of "Lullaby for Linus," there's his little cartoon, and "Snoopy Does the Samba." And this is a piece, I would never, ever write down to children. It's a piece I like very much. I want the grown-ups to like it, but it's kind of simple and the movements are short, and it works for young kids. Here's the program with our famous dog on the cover and instead of a program note I wrote an open letter to the Peanuts Gang, which can be read between movements if that works. And this was done here at Carnegie Hall. It's been done a lot since then actually, I must say. And there's a wonderful gal named Judy Sladky, who dances in the Snoopy suit and it's just, it really is adorable. And after the piece finished, Snoopy poked his head out and came and got down on bended knee and asked the orchestra if they would play "Snoopy Does the Samba" again so he could dance. And she does an incredible dance. I think I told you she's doing it in Chicago a few times with the Chicago Symphony. And here's a picture: This is Charlotte Blake Aston, who acted as a kind of narrator for the piece, there's Charles Schultz, me, and this, of course, you know who that is. Here are some more pictures on the stage at Carnegie Hall at the premiere, these are Orpheus. This is me and Schultz. He actually came to town quite a bit in advance, like the season before and we went to the Kaplan space and I played what I had and we talked about it. This is my favorite picture. Judy's a great, Judy Sladky, Snoopy, is a great improviser, and when this cameraman got there, the dog ran over to see. And Sparky Schultz did a, isn't that a cute name, that's what he likes, he did a cartoon about this. Isn't that cute? I love that Snoopy's listening here. Schroeder's playing my piece and Snoopy is listening. This appeared in 2600 newspapers round the world, and I brought along a copy that a friend of mine who was in Taiwan on a medical convention - Marty Segal's son-in-law - picked up the China Post in Taiwan and here was this cartoon about this piece at Carnegie Hall in English with Chinese underneath. And I've seen it in Belgium in Flemish, and it's kind of amazing. That was the first piece.

AG:

That was an auspicious beginning.

ETZ:

Yeah, and it was fun, and it was really a lovely time. I think the kids had a good time. It's a piece that, it's not a teaching piece about the orchestra or anything like that, but it is a portrayal of characters in music and they have very different characters. The odd thing is here I am an old composer and I'm sitting there and thinking now what kind of a dance would Snoopy do? And of course I came up with Samba.

AG:

So what was the next piece?

ETZ:

Well, the next commission was the Violin Concerto and this was written for Pam Frank. I do have a picture.

AG:

And again the idea, specifically of a violin concerto was it yours or were you asked for a violin concerto?

ETZ:

We talked about, you know, what do you most want to do, what are the things that would work. We talked very early on about a string quartet. And we had to get the Emersons in the right season. All of that sort of thing. But a violin concerto was something really to come bursting out of me and I love Pam's playing and the Orchestra of St. Luke's is quite a presence at Carnegie Hall, and so that kind of made sense. So for whatever reasons the next commission was a violin concerto. And here's a program of the premiere; here's a picture of me and Pam; I look ecstatic, which I was; and here's the published score which was published in the violin and piano arrangement by Danny Dorff, by the way, who just gave our . . . .
[break in tape]

ETZ:

…Andre of course was in the premiere of Intrada, Andre Emilianoff. Jorja Fellzanis is the concert master of the Minnesota Orchestra, which premiered the Triple Concerto, and she was the associate concertmaster in San Francisco when they did my Second Symphony. And Paul Neubauer was in the Philharmonic when they did a piece I wrote called Symbolon which was premiered in Leningrad with Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic and of course it had a viola solo in it. Oh, this is a picture in Russia

of Zubin and me and Rozhdestvensky, the conductor. That was in Leningrad, in those days. Formerly Saint Petersburg, once again St. Petersburg. And Paul of course is on the recording of my Clarinet Quintet and it's . . .

AG:

Why don't we take the String Quartet with us and sit and talk a little more about the Violin Concerto and then the String Quartet. It strikes me as a little unusual having written several other concertos, piano, trombone, flute, that you waited so long to write a violin concerto having been a violinist more than anything else, yourself. And in a sense, not needing any consulting to write a violin concerto. Did you consciously put it off or was it just a matter of never the right opportunity?

ETZ:

Well, the truth is, I had started one for Joe many years ago. And I just tore it up. But I in a way, I kinda wanted to wait because you know when you play something you don't want to write something that's based on the way you play. And I think I probably benefited from the distance, although I actually got calluses while I was working on it because I still do a lot of improvising on the violin when I'm working and of course I played through everything. I play through every note of all my string parts in every piece. But I don't know. I think that the violin concerto was something that was very much in me. Almost all of the reviews have said something about, one was a love song to the violin, another that it's a gift to the violin, it was very much a . . . from me to the fiddle. And then again, I was thinking about the continuity of it. One of the things that occurred to me, and I actually wrote it in a program note, Pam has this gorgeous Guarnari. It's from the time of Vivaldi. And it occurred to me that although you don't associate the violin with contemporary music that, in effect, it's been playing new music since the 18th century. This very instrument. And that there's something in it that excites the imagination of people, continually, from different times, and in different ways. It's just an amazing instrument. I played the violin because I adored the violin, not because I was given it and good schooling as a child. But I think that it was very fortuitous that it was a later concerto rather than an earlier one.

AG:

And of course the next big piece was also a string piece, times four this time.

ETZ:

Yes. And while I didn't have a, we only had slides of the Emerson Quartet and my publisher had done the thing that appeared in the internet, but I, it comes out not clear enough. I found this picture [showing photo] from 1984, this is the Emerson Quartet. That's Fred Sherry, with black hair, there's another picture

AG:

What was the occasion then?

ETZ:

This was the premiere of my double quartet for strings, which was done by the Chamber Music Society and the Emerson String Quartet was one of the quartets and then there was a quartet from the chamber music society. So here again, this is a relationship that kind of gets re-fertilized.

AG:

Fourteen years later they've got their own quartet.

ETZ:

Yeah. It's amazing, isn't it. And here's this piece this is the score of the String Quartet, No.2, and here is the concert program. Did you see that thing in USA Today?

AG:

It was proclaimed the best new chamber music piece of the previous year.

ETZ:

...of '98, which is very nice.

ETZ:

And I'm happy to say that they're playing it this summer in Aspen, Ravinia, and Tanglewood, which is awfully, awfully nice . . . awfully nice. This was a great labor of love for me, because string instruments to me are kind of like the soul of music. And chamber music is probably, although I've spent so many years in the orchestral field and I love orchestral music, there is something about chamber music and the electricity of action from player to player and I began this piece even with a kind of an image . . . I played a lot of the string quartet literature. So many of the pieces of the literature are like a layer cake with the cello, viola, second violin, first violin that even when they break apart from

that they kind of eventually come back. And there have been some people who tried to create totally different repertoires like a couple of Elliott's quartets, where they're almost in different universes playing, and I had a third concept, and that was like a galaxy where you have these figures that fly out like a planet would appear to, and get pulled back into the source. And that there's this kind of gravitational pull, that they want to merge and they want to fly free, and they don't...when they merge they don't end up in any particular order. So it's not quite like the standard repertoire and it's not quite like, say, Elliott Carter's four different universes, it's like one universe, but people, sort of, flying freely. And of course a lot of that had to do with the fact that both Gene and Phil Setzer, they both play first violin and you have, de facto, no second violin. And I, one of the things I said to them "Don't tell me who's going to play first." I don't want to know. I want to write two first violin parts. I don't want to have it set in my mind who's got the part marked number one.

I must say this began as a three-year relationship and it became clear that we needed that additional year to really kind of wrap some things up, including the Young Composers Workshop, which is the concert we had last week. And that was also something that I felt, I haven't done anything at Carnegie Hall that I didn't think was worth my time. And I do feel that the music world has been extremely good to me. And this has been an opportunity for me to give back. And I have about three years of correspondence with various people here about what's the best thing we can do for young composers. There's a model: of course the Issac Stern Chamber Music workshop is a wonderful thing; choral, there's the Robert Shaw and now Charles Dutoit workshops have been interesting. Boulez has done them, Berio did one, but what I wanted to do was try to step back and see what the needs of young composers are and how we could address them in a focused, intense way and we certainly were intense. So we had a three-day workshop that lasted from the 10th through the 12th of April '99 and it began fittingly with a rehearsal and ended with a concert. Carnegie Hall generously commissioned four young composers who were the focus of the workshop, but any of the auditors, and we had about 36 from 16 different states, and many of them actually foreign and they were just in school in a different state, many of the issues that came up in rehearsals around the featured composers I think were very instructive to the other young composers.

AG:

Explain the structure a little bit too, how you went about it.

ETZ:

Well . . . I tried to pack as much into it as we could. As a matter of fact there was one point Judy said to me “Well, how are you going to do all this?” Work it out: how long who’s going to spend doing this or that and what I finally came up with, the whole first day was spent in rehearsal, and since we had four different ensembles, we didn’t have to take breaks. So while they’re re-setting the stage the performers and the composers got to talk, and we talked with the audience about what the problems are what the issues are that came up in this rehearsal and so on. I have to say, and back up a bit, and say how we chose the featured young composers. As a ballpark idea I said, out of school and under 35 and instead of going the route of the anonymous committee, I picked three colleagues that I thought knew a lot of young composers and were quite different in themselves, and asked them each to recommend two or three young composers that they felt strongly enough about that they were willing to stand up in Carnegie Hall and say, at Weill Recital Hall I think you should listen to this composer because . . . So I asked Milton Babbitt, Chris Rouse, and Olly Wilson to join me in this and to be a faculty for this three day workshop as well, and they were delighted to do it, and came up with some wonderful names. From this we selected three composers, I added a fourth and these were the composers that got the commissions and whose works were being rehearsed, discussed, and performed in the workshop. The first day of the workshop we went from rehearsal to rehearsal, with the mentor composer and the young composer talking in between about the issues and we had, in every case we had very articulate performers who were able to say this was a problem this was wonderful, this worked . . . you know. They were excellent. And also instructive to the people who were listening.

The second day we began with a panel of publishers, Boosey and Hawkes, Schirmers, Presser, European-American representatives spoke, particularly addressing questions that our auditors had sent through a questionnaire, that they were really interested in. And we talked about many issues around music publishing. We had a, we followed that up with what I can only describe as a composers’ fair, where we had card tables around the very large Rohatyn Room and we had about 16 exhibitors and they came from all over the organizations that seemed to me to be local enough and universal enough and not to be selling composers anything. All of the organizations that are aids and comfort to young composers, or to old composers for that matter, and I went around this room with a hand-held microphone, and I had emphasized to everyone that they had one or two minutes to tell what their organization could do for composers and then they had literature on this table and the room was, after the short, little introduction of the American Music Center, American Composers’ Alliance, The American Composers’ Forum, ACO, the American Academy in Rome, the MacDowell Colony, the Copland Foundation, the CRI, the New

World, I'm probably leaving something out, but mainly all of these organizations that serve composers in some way got to say what they did, and give their literature to everybody who just roamed around and asked them questions and took things. Later in the afternoon we had a panel where the four senior composers talked about various things, about life as a composer. We had Jennifer Wadda, from the, head of publicity here come in and talk to the composers about their concerns, about having a press kit, or whatever it is one needs for that. One of the most important things for me as former performer, I asked my editor at Presser to come in and do an hour-and-a-half lecture/demonstration on techniques for making good scores and parts. And particularly with the new computer technology. It's wonderful on the one hand and on the other it has lots of little problems that need to be overcome. At any rate, that I thought was very helpful to them.

The following day we had the dress rehearsal of all the pieces, and a kind of a dry run through for the composer, the mentor and for the young composer to speak about the piece followed by a lunch at BMI where Ralph Jackson told us about issues of rights and what-not, and what BMI could do for young composers, and that very night we had a reception at ASCAP where Fran Richards did the same thing and in between Ara moderated a panel with four mentor composers on the general topic of how do you define success as a composer, which I think was a rather interesting discussion. And we ended our three-day workshop with a concert. And I feel very happy about what we were able to give to the next generation of composers in this context and the commitment of Carnegie Hall. And I hope this is a commitment that is always there, to nurture the next generation, be they performers or composers to have, to give us this space to grow in.

AG:

Another project that you've been involved in more recently also does that in a very different and unexpected way, which is the Millennium Piano Book. Which is another underserved area, talk about how that came about and the idea for that.

ETZ:

Well, the Millennium Piano Book is a . . . the notion of it was to approach about ten composers who were not at all known for doing anything other than on a very high level of virtuosity. And ask them to write pieces that were of modest difficulty, without getting into what is modest difficulty. We were free as composers to define our own term or ask whoever we trusted to tell us about this, with the notion that there's something important for a person, who say…one thinks of many adult piano students who we know, people on our own board, for instance, who play piano at a certain level, and how nice for them to be

able to get into this. A few twentieth-century composers have done this, of course Bartok with Mikrokosmos, Gyorgi Kurtag has done something very similar for pianists not on the highest level of virtuosity. And I signed right on to this project, I thought it was a very good, important project. And again we tried to go across the musical spectrum, so that we didn't get ten pieces that were alike but ten highly individual pieces where you could feel the personality of the composer but maybe the work is easier than normal. In my case, I wrote a piano piece that I could play. If I can play it you know it's modest difficulty.

AG:

Your association began with a lunch with Judy Arron and Kristen. You were always very closely associated with Judy, working directly with her, and of course as we now record this in April 1999, it's been a few months since Judy's death in December of 1998. For a future historian of Carnegie Hall who may be looking at this tape years from now talk a little about Judy's place specific to the composer's chair, and to you personally.

ETZ:

Personally, I would have to say, all of us who knew her reasonably well, knew the struggle she had undergone for a number of years. As a matter of fact the piece that I wrote for the Millennium Piano Book I began when Kristen called me with the terrible news and I wrote on it and then came back and put it together some time later. And I tried to make it sort of upbeat and I couldn't. It's too damn sad; it's a lament, and I just called it "Lament." It's just, I think it's a terrible loss of somebody who fought very hard for life. But the thing that I think she will be remembered for is the turning Carnegie Hall towards life, not just fixing up the auditorium and making it more attractive and making the backstage area more comfortable, but really addressing the issues of the family concerts, the educational outreach, the issues of the young performers, the distinctive debuts series, the workshops addressing the problems of young performers of various kinds, and now young composers, and of course the notion that music is still being written and we need . . . we do have our lonely room that we retreat to to write music, and that's a very important part of it, that kind of quiet, down time that we, I need to have as a composer, but you have to, you're in a climate, you're in a soil, you need the nurturing, you need the interaction with performers, you need to have the open arms of a place like Carnegie Hall saying, "come, bring me your music," and the notion that when you step on the stage of Carnegie Hall you have this sense of the ghosts of the past. I've always loved the image in the theater where you have the light that never goes out because of the ghosts of the actors who've been there, and you think of who's been here and left behind something

of their spirit. That's a wonderful, wonderful thing and it's inspiring, but you have to take care of the . . . it's not enough to cut the flowers, you've got to plant the seeds, you've got to water them, nurture them, and I think she will be remembered as somebody who set a new standard in a presenting institution, like a concert hall, of trying to address, not just maintaining the past, but creating the future.

AG:

Any closing thoughts? It's very fitting that we're ending as we began. We're talking about composers' progress from the privacy of their individual room and how quiet and individual that process is and how it ends up in a concert hall and your progress has ended up right within the halls of Carnegie Hall where you're now a part of the history of this hall. Anything you'd like to add as we close this conversation?

ETZ:

I can't think of anything. It's just that I have, for me, it's a great privilege to be able to do what I do. I work very hard at it and I'm always striving for something but it's a mystery: what music is, where it comes from, how this thing happens, where it comes to life and I think that this is a place that celebrates that. And I'm just awfully happy that I've spent so many years of my life in Carnegie Hall because it's kind of a, it's been a kind of a musical home to me and in many respects and I may be leaving home but I'm not estranged.

AG:

No.

ETZ:

I'll always be a friend of Carnegie Hall.

AG:

You'll always have a home and you in turn have made it a home for quite a few fellow composers and now even in this week for young composers who probably never imagined that their creative path would bring them to Carnegie Hall. Ellen, thanks for your generosity and all that you've done including your very generous amount of time this afternoon.

ETZ:

Well, thank you Ara. And Nick.

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